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SUBJECT: STRIKINGLY POSITIVE ELECTION DAY ATMOSPHERE IN SERB-MAJORITY MUNICIPALITY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Herceg Novi municipality has a significant Serb majority, an opposition mayor, and voted overwhelmingly against independence in the 2006 referendum. However, less than two years later, the atmosphere there on election day was positive and forward looking. The elections indicated what appears to be gradual shift in attitude, with citizens rejecting political extremism and seemingly accepting that their future lies not with Serbia, but in independent Montenegro. Serb List presidential candidate Andrija Mandic made a strong showing in the municipality with 30 percent of the vote, but incumbent President Filip Vujanovic won with 34 percent. In the municipal election contest, incumbent Socialist People's Party (SNP) managed to retain control of the assembly, but the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) made a solid showing as well. End summary.

Looking to Podgorica, Not Belgrade

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¶2. (SBU) Mention Herceg Novi in Podgorica and one usually hears warnings that the municipality is a "hotbed of Serb nationalism" and "full of people who still look to Belgrade for political leadership." Poloff spent three days in the municipality monitoring local and presidential elections for the OSCE/ODIHR mission, and found that in contrast to its reputation, Herceg Novi is full of optimism about its future in an independent Montenegro -- particularly in terms of economic prospects. Although many residents still identify themselves as Serbs, they are quick to note that they are "Montenegrin Serbs" who are fully participating in the political life of their country -- Montenegro.

Overwhelmingly Positive Atmosphere for Election Day

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¶3. (SBU) The people of Herceg Novi were welcoming to Poloff and the rest of the American OSCE monitoring team, and the atmosphere on election day was notably positive. Lines began forming at polling stations across Herceg Novi well before the polls opened at 8am, and election board members were serious about their jobs and voters were respectful of election rules and procedures. Also, in striking contrast to most other towns and municipalities across Montenegro, not a single presidential candidate's billboard -- neither an opposition candidate nor incumbent Vujanovic -- was defaced in Herceg Novi.

14. (SBU) By the lunch lull around 1pm, it was already clear that voter turnout was high. A local Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) party official taking a break told us his party was confident of their presidential candidate's win, but was also positive about the party's potential to take the local assembly in Herceg Novi. In the end, the DPS had their victory nation-wide -- by midnight it was already clear that Vujanovic had won in the first round -- but not in the municipality. The Socialist People's Party (SNP) retained their majority in the local assembly, securing 12 seats. The DPS message, however, appears to be resonating with local voters, as the party garnered 11 seats.

15. (SBU) Though election boards worked well into the night, the day ended as encouragingly as it began, with our OSCE colleagues agreeing that by and large the elections had been free and fair. There was celebratory honking and flag waving throughout the town by supporters of three separate parties: the SNP -- whose adherents notably were flying the SNP party flag but not the Serbian flag, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) -- who gained one seat in the local assembly -- and the DPS. As our polling station finished tabulating votes, local party representatives from the Serb List, Democratic Serbian Party of Montenegro (DSS), Movement for Change (PzP), and SDP all headed home together, sharing a car ride and laughs about their long evening of ballot counting.

Comment

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16. (SBU) The cross-party cooperation and the convivial attitude

PODGORICA 00000127 002 OF 002

in Herceg Novi during election weekend may not exist all the time, but it was heartening nonetheless. It appears to demonstrate a softening of attitudes among a formerly staunch pro-Union populace, and indicates that despite how people voted two years ago, the vast majority of Montenegrins have accepted that their political future is linked to Podgorica, not Belgrade.  
MOORE